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Subject: DEC probed Taconic plastics plant in 1997

DEC probed Taconic plastics plant in 1997

By Brendan J. Lyons

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Health complaints blamed on toxic emissions in Petersburg

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Exterior of the Taconic plastics company on Friday, Feb. 26, 2016 in Petersburg, N.Y. (Lori Van Buren / Times Union)

Albany

The state [Department of Environmental Conservation](#) investigated complaints nearly 20 years ago that people who lived near a plastics plant in Petersburg were becoming sick from the toxic chemicals emanating from the facility.

The 1997 investigation focused on emissions from the Taconic plastics plant on Route 22. Internal DEC documents indicate state officials were aware then that the facility's high-heat processes made the perfluorinated compounds used at the manufacturing facility more toxic as they left the plant's smokestacks. Internal state documents obtained by the [Times Union](#) also show that environmental officials were aware the hazardous man-made chemicals were flowing from smokestacks used at similar manufacturing plants in Hoosick Falls, as well as in Bennington, Vt., and Merrimack, N.H.

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"It is shocking that DEC had information going back nearly 20 years regarding the toxicity of this chemical and apparently never followed up on it in a meaningful way with this potential exposure to local populations," said [David Engel](#), an attorney for Healthy Hoosick Water, a grass-roots citizens group that formed last year in response to what its members said was a lack of action by state and local officials. "In 2014, the state [Department of Health](#) acted as if they'd never heard of the chemical."

A March 1997 memo by the New York DEC's Toxic Assessment Section, which was part of the agency's [Division of Air Resources](#), said government scientists were examining the toxicity of the Petersburg plant's chemicals "in response to the neighborhood complaints around Taconic plastics of a disagreeable stink, reports of nausea and headaches, and visible bluish smoke."

The DEC documents also noted that employees at similar manufacturing plants, where perfluorinated chemicals were heated to more than 700 degrees Fahrenheit, showed "symptoms consistent with polymer fume fever ... including chills, fever, tightness of the chest and other influenza-like symptoms."

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The documents indicate New York's DEC shared information on the problem with environmental officials

in Vermont.

The perfluorinated compounds referenced in the internal memorandums are from a class of chemicals that include perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA. The discovery of PFOA in the Hoosick Falls water supply two years ago led New York officials in January to declare the [Saint-Gobain](#) Performance Plastics plant in that village a state Superfund site. The designation came 17 months after a resident first reported that PFOA, a toxic chemical, was detected in water samples in the village's well system at levels exceeding those recommended by the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#).

State and local officials have defended their handling of the toxic pollution, including waiting more than 15 months to warn residents in Hoosick Falls to stop drinking the tainted water. But the state documents show that concerns about health problems linked with exposure to the man-made chemicals stretch back years.

The 1997 memo sent to the DEC's air-pollution unit concluded the "blue smoke" leaving Taconic's smokestacks was probably from toluene, a chemical used to make adhesives, but not of great concern. The memo said DEC scientists believed toluene was "not likely" the source of the health problems being reported.

The documents indicate DEC scientists knew then that "the resident complaints associated with emissions from this facility may be related to the thermal decomposition products of PTFE."

Teflon is the brand name for the man-made chemical, polytetrafluoroethylene or PTFE, that's part of a family of manufacturing chemicals used since the 1940s to make non-stick and other household and commercial products that are heat-resistant or repel grease and water.

"Toxic effects in animals from PTFE fumes are found at low inhaled concentrations," the DEC memo states, adding that small concentrations of the chemical at temperatures even lower than those used at the Petersburg manufacturing plant "caused 100 percent mortality in rats."

[David Hassel](#), a mechanical engineer who worked at the Hoosick Falls plant now owned by Saint-Gobain, helped design the ovens that were part of a high-heat process used in the manufacturing. He said that from the 1970s into the 1990s regulation of smokestacks focused largely on the stench and opacity of the plumes because of concerns about coal-fired plants and steel mills, and less attention was paid to the chemical plants. The chemical plants were largely self-regulated and manufacturers used air to dilute the emissions, to lower the opacity, but it didn't reduce the levels of toxic chemicals released.

"The regulators ... were taking the easy way out and only responding to visible smoke and odors which people complained about, and paid little attention to what was actually coming out of the stack and what it might do to people," Hassel said. "The time period in which this was very strong was from about 1976 to 1996. After that even Vermont started to ask about the actual content of the organics and particulates both in the process and in the emissions, although by 2001, even though PFOA had been brought to their attention, they still had no idea what it was or how much was being used or how toxic it was and that it lasted forever."

In 2006, the EPA reached an agreement with DuPont and other manufacturers to stop producing or using PFOA, although DuPont continued producing it because the agreement did not call for the end of production until 2015.

The EPA settlement with DuPont came less than a year after DuPont agreed to pay \$10.25 million in civil penalties to settle the complaint brought by the EPA regarding the company's PFOA pollution in the Midwest. At the time, it was the largest civil administrative penalty obtained by the EPA under federal environmental statutes.

In early March, the Times Union first reported that the levels of PFOA in the well water near Taconic's plant as far back as 2004 were as high as 152,000 parts per trillion, far above the 400-ppt threshold recommended by the EPA for short-term human exposure.

More recent tests, conducted in 2013, showed that the level of PFOA in well water under the plant had dropped significantly in the nine years since the contaminant was first discovered in the water.

Taconic and several other similar manufacturing plants in Rensselaer County, Vermont and New Hampshire have used PFOA in their manufacturing dating back decades.

Scott N. Fein, an attorney for Taconic, could not be reached for comment.

It's unclear whether the state took steps to curb the amount of perfluorinated chemicals seeping from Taconic's smokestacks in the late 1990s. The DEC provided information Friday on three penalties the company received in the late 1990s for allegedly violating emissions regulations. The largest civil penalty against the company was handed down in 2000 when Taconic paid the state \$280,000 for constructing a smokestack without a permit and without "necessary controls," according to DEC records.

Robert A. Bilott, an Ohio attorney helping to represent an estimated 3,500 people in a class-action lawsuit against DuPont related to PFOA exposure, said he is not familiar with the situation at Taconic but reviewed the documents at the request of the Times Union. "It would be important to determine what follow up or further investigation of these complaints and potential PFOA emissions was done back in the 1990s," Bilott said.

The discovery of PFOA in the wells at Taconic's plant in 2004 did not trigger any public notification or environmental investigation when the DEC was notified about the situation that year, according to state officials. At the time, PFOA was not a regulated contaminant.

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